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JOHN MASEFIELD: A STUDY

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

THE two most justly celebrated poets in England to-day are John Masefield and Thomas Hardy. Masefield is equally well known in America as in England; but Hardy still has to conquer the American public for his poetry. And indeed it is only natural that the American public should have been so much more readily attracted to the younger and lesser writer. Something in the crude, rough vigour of the style, something in the strong command over intense, rapid narrative, something in the restless, adventurous, exploring temper of the man himself, has made of Masefield an appealing figure to most Americans. We are too young as a nation, too restless and heterogeneous as a people, too romantically unsettled in our convictions, to be able to appreciate Hardy's classic fatalism, his pagan sense of the dependence of man upon nature, his tragic detachment and sympathy. We prefer the poet who recalls in our own day the romantic freshness of Chaucer, to the brooding, patient, tireless craftsman who recalls Aeschylus and the middle period of Shakespeare. Yet though it is possible to think of Hardy alone, it is impossible for those who have read both poets to think of Masefield without reference, expressed or unconscious, to Hardy.

John Masefield is a poet who has already passed through two well-defined periods of development. There is the early Masefield, the poet of *Salt-Water Ballads*, *The Everlasting Mercy*, *Dauber*, *Biography*. There is the more mature, more philosophical, questioning and brooding later Masefield, the poet who has largely developed since the war, the writer of the *Sonnets*, of *August, 1914*, of the poems in *Lollington Downs*. In the early phase Masefield was altogether the romantic realist, the rediscoverer of a type of a poetry practically lost to English literature since the days of Chaucer. An exaltation of crude

physical vigor, a crude, religious ecstasy, a surging sweep of narrative, immense vividness of descriptive writing, an almost melodramatic passion for the violent and the vulgar sides of life, marked this early phase. In the later phase, came a deepening sense of fatalistic tragedy, a sombre, darker skepticism; a heart-searching appeal for the beautiful, a quieter and more developed technic. One felt somehow that the war had broadened the poet's character, had developed him in many directions which he himself had been the last man to suspect possible. One looked forward with wider hope to the appearance of works showing a more rich and various imagination, once the immediate pressure of the war was relieved.

Since the war, Masefield has published two volumes, in such rapid succession that the critics have scarcely had time to deal completely with either, and I believe that I am right in saying that no parallel handling of both has as yet been attempted. *Reynard the Fox*, the earlier of these two, is, on the face of it, the apotheosis of the early narrative style. One almost suspects it of being an early poem, rehandled perhaps;—in *Lollingdon Downs* there is a short fragment about a fox which reads like the rejected variant of one of its pages. It certainly reveals a wider mastery and maturity than any other of the narratives which Masefield has written. The burst of exultation at the close of *The Everlasting Mercy*, the description of rounding Cape Horn in *Dauber*, must yield place to the pictorial sweep, the concentrated drama, the knowledge and appreciation of animal psychology, which fill the entire second part of this poem. Here the later Masefield has triumphantly given place to the earlier; the description of the hunt itself, never before attempted on such a scale in English literature, is a triumph. It is interesting to note that the poet's sympathies are rather with the hunted than with the hunters; the fox is not only allowed to escape at the close, but we are given a clear picture of all that went on in his brain during those tense hours of adventure and tragedy. Had Hardy treated the theme, we feel certain that the centre of interest would have been reversed, and the sense of human, as opposed to animal nature, been given greater prominence.

When we turn from *Reynard* to *Enslaved*, the poem which stands at the head of Masefield's latest volume, we

are struck with a certain amount of bewilderment. *Enslaved* is, like *Rosas*, essentially a reversion to a more primitive type of romantic poetry than that contained in *The Everlasting Mercy*, in *Dauber* and in *Reynard*. Here we have no longer romantic realism, but picture-book, swash-buckling adventure of the sort that delighted our boyhood. If a parallel is to be found in the poet's own work, one may recall some novels Masefield has written: *Captain Margaret*, *Lost Adventure*, *Martin Hyde*. *Enslaved* is another tale of wild and lawless adventure, carried up to the verge of tragedy, saved from tragedy by an almost miraculous interposition of Providence, and, like the tales I have mentioned, essentially unconvincing. The skill displayed in the descriptive passages is very great; but the subject-matter itself covers no new ground, nor is it sufficiently strong in itself to hold up the wealth of detail lavished upon it. Except for the passages describing the escape from the quarry, and the scene in the apartment where the women captives are confined, this poem is one of Masefield's failures.

The rest of the volume contains entirely the later Masefield, and is, so far, the most complete vindication of the direction in which he is likely to travel in the future. *The Hounds of Hell*, the second poem in the volume, is a full-length ballad constructed out of the familiar fragment in *King Lear*, about St. Withold and the nightmare. It is decidedly a fine ballad, far more akin in spirit to the finest of the old English ballads, than Wilde's overrated *Ballad of Reading Gaol* or Swinburne's deliberately imitative *Border Ballads*. It recalls largely Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, and like that poem, it gains its effect through the employment of supernatural machinery, and through its insistence upon a note of weirdness and horror. This last is almost a new note for Masefield. It was attempted before with small success in *The Daffodil Fields*, but here it dominates the poem. And the result is an impressive work, direct and vivid in transparent simplicity, and unmarred by didacticism. *The Hounds of Hell*, if not so supremely great in imaginative originality as *The Ancient Mariner*, is at least worthy of a place beside it. I cannot say more.

But even more interesting than this ballad to those few, among whom I count myself, who demand that every great poet give us the concentrated quintessential fruit of his life-

experience, are the poems entitled *Sonnets*, *The Lemmings*, and *On Growing Old*. Here Masefield speaks with the ageless voice of maturity, of that maturity which is at once a tragic burden of knowledge, and yet an unsurpassable and indestructible treasure-house of beauty. To some these poems may sound like a definite farewell to the world, but I feel that it is not so, and that Masefield will write even greater poems than he has already written. He has only exchanged the fierce exultant enthusiasm of youth and young manhood for the penetrating wisdom of middle-age. To be able to say, once and for all, "Be with me, beauty, for the fire is dying," is to state in a phrase the full significance of the past and to hold forth a lonely torch of hope for the future.

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